

Clearing the air:

Nurses helping to shape the national agenda for environmental health and older persons

In October 2002, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) launched an Aging Initiative to study the effects of environmental health hazards on older persons. The initiative will also identify model programs that will provide opportunities for older persons to volunteer in their communities to reduce environmental hazards and protect the environment for future generations.

According to Sigma Theta Tau International president, May L. Wykle, RN, PhD, FAAN, it's an issue that goes beyond the air quality in a given community. She says, "Older adults reside in different environments of care in addition to living independently in the community. These various environments may pose hidden health hazards that impact quality of life for elders. Continuous assessment of all environmental safety factors is essential for the well-being of elders." Dr. Wykle is chairing an Aging Advisory Group to work with the EPA on the initiative.

Sigma Theta Tau International is a partner with EPA on the initiative and is assisting the agency in developing specific programs and recommendations that will help position nurses as advocates of older persons with diseases that are worsened by environmental pollution.

"Nurses are often at the center of treatment teams when it comes to chronic bronchitis, emphysema, asthma and even COPD," says Kathy Sykes, senior advisor to the Aging Initiative. "By bringing nurses into a fuller awareness of how environmental factors contribute and then inviting them to help develop real-world solutions for their communities, we think we are moving in the right direction."

The EPA has developed a National Research and Action Agenda that will:

1. Determine research gaps on the impact of environmental health hazards to older persons.
2. Determine tools that can address the impact an aging society will have on our environment.
3. Identify model programs that will provide volunteer opportunities to reduce environmental hazards in local communities.

Add your voice

The EPA is seeking public comment on the agenda until **September 30, 2003** to assure that the final agenda includes input from the broadest base of expertise including federal, state, local and tribal governments; public and private organizations; professional health, aging and environmental associations; academia; business and volunteer organizations; and other stakeholders, including older Americans and their families.

The agency encourages comments from nurses and all those interested in addressing environmental health hazards that affect the health of older persons. Comments can be logged at the [Aging Initiative Web site](#), by e-mail to aging.info@epa.gov or by fax at 202.564.2723.